

BLOOMING MARVELLOUS

Starting out with a very small business a few years back, Sydney florist Jodie McGregor Flowers now enjoys a growing body of regular customers, has opened a second store, and runs an engaging ecommerce website to market the business beyond local boundaries. How did she do it? Interview by **Naomi Hulbert**

WHO'S TALKING?

Members of the Jodie McGregor Flowers' team, and their web developers from Connecting Space, share their secrets for combining business, personal and online success.

Jodie McGregor Flowers
www.jodiemcgregor.com
Jodie McGregor & Stuart White
Connecting Space
www.connectingspace.com
Sek Mun Wong & Vivian Wong

CLICK ONTO THE JODIE MCGREGOR FLOWERS website and you won't find the usual clinical approach so common in ecommerce websites. A browse through the site is more like a stroll around your local florist, though without the heady perfume.

"We know there's a time and place for baby's breath, we just don't think that's very often," laughs Jodie on the home page. "We love unique arrangements, not some cookie-cutter bunch anyone could have flung together."

It's Jodie McGregor's bespoke approach to lovers that makes her arrangements so attractive. She and partner (in life and business) Stuart White have applied this same personal touch to their website, and the result is equally appealing.

Planting the seed: growing customer relationships

Jodie: It's really important to get a few simple things right before you start to build customer relationships. For us, the first and most important thing is that the flowers need to be fabulous, and that means having a variety of interesting and exotic flowers, as well as the more recognisable favourites. Of course, it's critical that we sell fresh flowers, and not ones past their best. We also need to ensure our team is skilled at putting the flowers together in a special way. If we get these things right then we're in a position where our clients trust and value us, and we're able to look at doing some things they'll really appreciate.

Stuart: We used to give our regulars a free bunch every so often to thank them. But since we've grown, we've found we've needed a more formal method of doing this, so we have a Flower Addicts club.

Customers accrue points when they shop with us, go in to the draw to win flowers each week, and once a month someone wins an amazing floral print by Warwick Orme, valued at \$795. We also send out birthday vouchers with special offers to all our customers if we know their birthdays.

"Probably the most important thing in our success is that we are both passionate about the business and want it to be the very best it can be"

Blooming together: successful partnerships

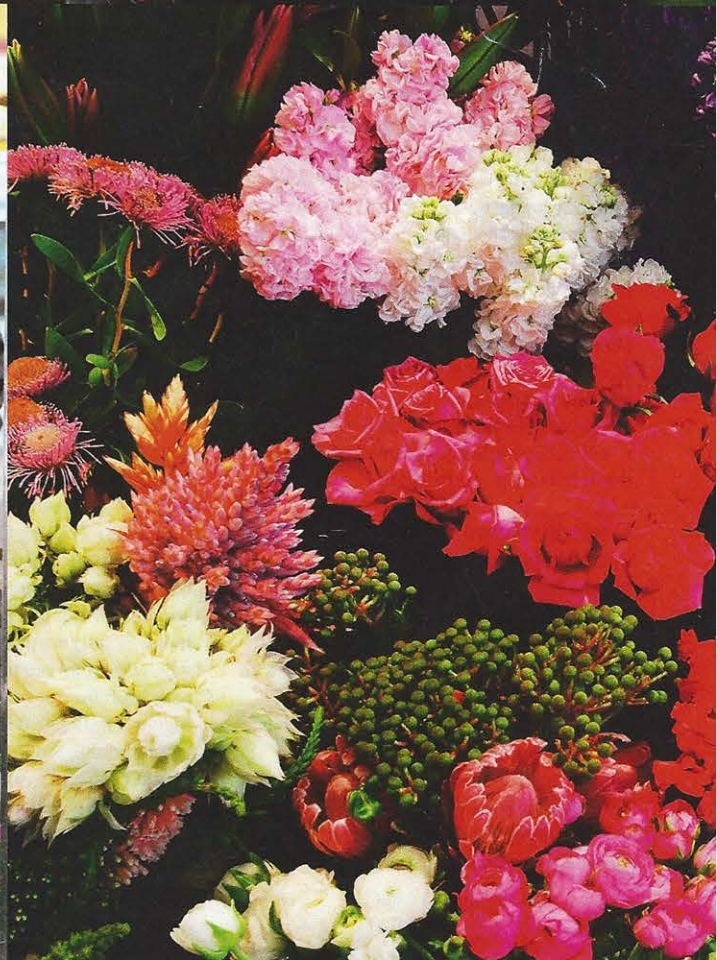
Stuart: Jodie and I live and work together, which can be a big strain on some couples. For us, probably the most important thing in our success is that we are both passionate about the business and want it to be the best it can be. So we're always working towards the same end result.

Jodie: And we have a strong level of trust with each other, which makes it easy to make decisions without having to second-guess each other. So we can concentrate on specific responsibilities that suit each other's strengths. Stu's driven, entrepreneurial and big-picture oriented, while I'm more creative, though I'm also good at making decisions on the spot to keep us heading in the right direction.

Stuart: And you're also very patient and understanding!

Tall poppies: standing out from the crowd

Jodie: A great florist will be able to get the customer excited about flowers, so they become a part of that person's life as something they really enjoy and value. It's amazing the number of people who tell us



MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR ONLINE BUSINESS

(Stuart White)

- Make it easy for customers to find you. This might mean registering a number of web addresses that would make sense to others
- Internet orders are important: the customer is trusting you completely without the benefit of any personal dialogue or communication so make sure you do it really well
- Actively and consistently check for new orders so you can respond effectively and in the quickest possible time
- Promote the website to your face-to-face customers. We do this by inviting customers to join our Flower Addicts club

what a positive impact the flowers have on them, and the difference in their mood if they have flowers in the house.

Stuart: I also think it's critical that you're able to put together the flowers in a way that screams 'Wow!' Because with so many people looking to sell flowers these days, such as greengrocers, furniture shops and markets, good florists will be successful by using their knowledge, design and passion.

Jodie: Whether we're dealing with people online, on the phone or in the shop, it's about trying to create a memorable experience. And because flowers are such a sensory experience, this can be hard to do online or over the phone. In the shop, we try to educate people about flowers and this tends to build their interest.

Friendly flowers: a website with personality

Stuart: We've put a whole heap of information on our website to give our customers a point of reference to learn all they can about different flowers and how to care for them. There's also a host of information about our services, our Flower Addicts club and how to order online.

Jodie: But we've tried to make the tone nice and friendly, to mirror what we do in the physical shop. And we've also taken

"Whether we're dealing with people online, on the phone or in the shop, it's about trying to create a memorable experience for the customers"

a light-hearted approach to ourselves, poking fun at our delay in getting into ecommerce with a banner proclaiming our site as "the better late than never website".

Stuart: For online orders, we've made it so people can almost build any type of flower arrangements they want and have it sent out. And to make it easier, we've made the descriptions of the styles and types in a relaxed, conversational tone. Our email newsletters and promotions follow the same approach too.

Stunted growth: initial ecommerce challenges

Jodie: We were so embarrassed that it took us so long to get our ecommerce website together. At first, the problem was that we were just so busy doing flowers that we could never find the time to get started on the internet. We knew it would take a lot of time getting the images, writing the content and establishing the look, feel and format.

Stuart: It was so frustrating. We asked a couple of companies about the type of site we wanted, and they tried to take us down a path that didn't cover off our 'must haves', and were more about templates. Then we selected a company that had cold-called us. They promised the world but were just not up to it and we had to cut them loose. By then we'd spent a lot of time and money working on the site and they wouldn't refund our sizeable deposit, so we took them to the Fair Trading Commission where they were ordered to pay back the money. But then they went into voluntary receivership so we never got our money back.

Jodie: Finally we picked some developers who were referred to us after we saw a site they built for one of our customers. Still, the biggest challenge was about finding the time to get it done. We were starting from scratch, we had to arrange photography shoots, and because we wanted to make it informative, we had to do a lot of research.

And because we wanted it to be as simple as possible for the user, we had to think about things such as the page fitting neatly on the screen and navigation keys working easily. We found it really difficult to understand that things worked differently on different browsers. The fact that we felt like we didn't have full control over these things was very challenging.

Budding arrangements: strategic ecommerce approach

Stuart: Once the site was built, we tried to make the order process a reflection of what we do in the shop, and guide the customer to getting exactly what they wanted. So we ask them to help build their flower combinations with a number of questions about style, price, colour and size. Importantly, customers can make special requests, just like in the shop.

Jodie: It's the same with email responses that go out after orders, or when someone has joined our Flower Addicts club. It's very conversational. In our approach, our language and even our corporate colours, we see the website as another position from which to build our brand.

Stuart: At first we just used PayPal, but it was so clumsy we just had to change it to make things easier for our customers. Now they can use all credit cards, PayPal, or even put their order on an account if they are an approved account-holder.

Waiting for spring: online next steps

Stuart: We need to get our web developers, Connecting Space, to make some changes to the online order system. We're torn between putting together a larger portfolio of our work for events and weddings, or leaving it as is. We see pros and cons with both. We'd also like to produce a small film which shows how the shop fills up and then gets emptied over a couple of days, from market buying to cleaning the buckets, and post it on the site. What else...



Welcome

The McGregor Empire Expands (a fraction).

Late at night, when the flowers are asleep, we at Jodie McGregor have been drawing up plans to take on the world. New York, London, Paris? Too obvious! We've opened in CASTLECrag and couldn't be happier. Now both sides of the bridge can enjoy our special approach to flowers. It's a bit old fashioned, as we have actual shops, with actual people inside. And we know there is a time and place for babies breath, we just don't think that's very often. We love unique arrangements that are specifically designed for you, not some cookie-cutter pre-prepared bunch anyone could have put together. We were proud to win NSW Florist of the Year in 2005 and we reckon that must mean we are on the right track. We look forward to seeing you in either Annandale or Castlecrag. Cheers, Jodie and Stu

Order flowers here!

Check out our Fairtrade market bags

Flower Addicts Club and Newsletter

Win Art valued at \$795!

The Jodie McGregor Flowers' website aims to keep its tone conversational and inviting

Jodie: We want to review our 'flower seasons' and include a photo for every flower, but I figure that's just something that will never get done! The idea of sending out our birthday bonus letters via email is pretty appealing, as we spend about \$500 a month at the moment doing it by snail mail.

Stuart: The other thing we've often thought about doing is including a daily special, based on what we see at the market that we think would appeal to our customers.

Jodie: Oh, and we really should update our home page more frequently, to give our customers a fresh story every now and then.

Digital blooms: the techies talk

Vivian: When Jodie and Stuart approached us about building the website, they already had a pretty strong idea of what they wanted. Visual design was easy because they already had a strong brand and a clear direction, so we focused on bringing that into the site. And as for navigation (information architecture), Stuart knew what he wanted, so we just ensured his ideas would fit well, and make sense.

Sek Mun: When it came to online orders, the

system had to be easy to use but also quite flexible, which made it complex underneath. We automated the delivery price calculations so the customer didn't have to enter extra information. The whole site, including the online order system, is built on COSM, our own content management system (CMS). What this means is that since the site's been launched, it needs little or no involvement from us to change content. Jodie and Stu can do everything themselves, which makes things very time efficient.

Vivian: Credit card security recently became a huge issue for another online florist, and one of the first things we recommended to Jodie and Stuart was to not store credit card numbers anywhere. It's just a risk that no small business should ever take. Another security issue is in storing passwords. Passwords can be reset if forgotten, but they should never be stored in the system.

Sek Mun: The ordering system is also quite different to other online florists, and reflects the way Jodie thinks about flowers, and the customised and personal service offered in the shops. We made the system more

NURTURE YOUR PEOPLE (Jodie McGregor)

- **Employ the person rather than the florist:** skills can be taught, but you have to be the right sort of person to want to give customers a really wonderful experience
- **Take notice:** make sure your people are encouraged and rewarded for playing their part in giving the customer a great experience
- **Plan treats:** we arrange massages and facials for our florists, throw parties with limousine transport, sea planes and fabulous restaurants
- **Be generous:** our bonuses are given based on performance, and outstanding customer service is a requirement
- **Provide feedback:** we're constantly providing feedback, and evaluating everyone's performance in an informal way

VALUE ECOMMERCE (Vivian Wong & Sek Mun Wong)

Launching an ecommerce presence created a new sales channel for Jodie McGregor Flowers, broadening their customer-base. In fact, to remain competitive, they really needed to have a web presence and in the end, they had to become one of the more innovative online florists. In a time when online florists abound with generic shopping cards, Jodie McGregor Flowers has successfully transferred their brand experience to the web.

user-friendly by using technologies such as AJAX, but also had to weigh up the benefits-versus-problems of some of the older browsers not being able to support javascript.

Vivian: For the future, there's the chance to get more creative. For example, it's possible we could look at re-integrating the site with their CRM/POS system. A more Web 2.0 idea would be to perhaps integrate with Facebook, such as a 'What Flower Am I?' application.